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U.S. helped contras get missiles

Sandinista copter downed by SAM

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WASHINGTON — Reagan administration officials played a role in helping U.S.-backed Nicaraguan insurgents to buy an anti-aircraft missile that downed a Nicaraguan helicopter in December, according to administration officials and congressional sources familiar with the case.

Senior officials, including Secretary of State George Shultz, have denied charges by the Sandinista government in Managua that the United States provided the rebels with the heat-seeking, surface-to-air SAM-7 missile that downed the Soviet-supplied Mi8 Sandinista helicopter on Dec. 2. Twelve Nicaraguan soldiers and two Cuban pilots were reported killed.

Knowledgeable sources, while confirming that the United States did not supply the Soviet-made SAM-7 missiles, said officials who monitor the rebels' activities passed information to the rebels through third parties on how to secure the weapons through foreign arms dealers.

In another instance of U.S. involvement, administration sources said that while the contras awaited delivery of the missiles, U.S. officials in Central America, acting on their own, described for the rebels the vulnerabilities of the Russian helicopters so they could use their new weapons effectively.

The rebels, or contras, reportedly purchased their first missiles from European arms dealers in February or March, took delivery in April at their Honduran camps and were trained in their use by private American arms experts.

"It wasn't a question of U.S. officials meeting secretly with guerrillas in the basement of the White House in the middle of the night and telling them 'Now boys, you gotta get surface-to-air missiles' and 'don't worry, we'll get them for you,'" said one official aware of contra activities.

'Indirect hints'

"But there were enough indirect hints from officials through third parties as to where they could go and get the weapons and training. The whole thing would have been impossible without some sort of U.S. participation."

The part American officials played was so discreet that it is unlikely that it could be conclusively established that they circumvented a congressional ban on assisting the contras, which was in place when the missiles were acquired in early 1985, the sources said.

"Those who helped covered their tracks so well that enough deniability was preserved," said a congressional source who was briefed by U.S. intelligence officials. He said there is no evidence the administration had a policy of supplying missiles to the rebels.

To understand the context in which U.S. officials became involved, it is necessary to review chronologically how the contras came to acquire the SAM-7s.

The process began election night, Nov. 6, 1984, when American intelligence sources reported that a Soviet merchant ship, the Bakuriani, was en route to Nicaragua reportedly carrying crated MiG-21 combat jets.

The report was wrong, but the crates did contain a new weapon for the Sandinistas: the first of several sophisticated Mi24 helicopter gunships that the Soviets have used against rebels in Afghanistan.

Within days U.S. officials warned the contras that the Sandinistas planned to employ the Mi24s against the Nicaraguan guerrillas and suggested that they needed anti-aircraft weapons.

At the time, contra leaders Adolfo Calero and Enrique Bermudez raised the possibility of obtaining U.S.-made Redeye surface-to-air missiles but the effort failed because of the congressional ban against supplying the contras with weapons, the sources said.

Private fund-raisers

They added, however, that National Security Council staffers involved with the contras, particularly White House liaison Lt. Col. Oliver North, suggested to private contra fund-raisers the possibility of steering the guerrillas toward an arms market source.

North did not talk to the rebels about the missiles but discussed the issue in conversations with individuals who raise private funds for the insurgents.

Chief among them, the sources said, was retired Army Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub who, in 1985, became the contras' chief private fund-raiser and military adviser. Singlaub, 65, was removed as chief of staff of U.S. forces in South Korea in 1977 after publicly disagreeing with President Carter's decision to reduce the level of American troops there.

"I was instrumental in helping the freedom fighters get the missiles," Singlaub acknowledged in a telephone conversation last week from Hawaii, where he was attending a military conference.

Singlaub denied that North or any other U.S. official guided him or the contras to arms dealers. But he admitted "discussing" the subject with North.

"I was not told by any official that this is what I had to do," said Singlaub, "but I did advise them of the plans so as to keep them informed and so they wouldn't be surprised." North's office offered no comment and refused a request for an interview.

Singlaub said he recommended the SAM-7s because they are the only portable ground-to-air missiles "freely" available through arms dealers who obtain them from East bloc countries or from warring factions in Lebanon.

Singlaub said that while he raised "a lot of money" for the contras in the United States in 1984 and 1985, all of the funds used to purchase the SAM-7s came from contributors outside U.S. territory or from foreign bank accounts where American donors deposited money. The reason, he said, was to avoid violating the 188-year-old Neutrality Act. The act prohibits arming expeditions from U.S. soil against a country with which the United States is not at war.

In January 1985, Calero said that a rich U.S. donor, whom he declined to identify, had deposited enough funds in a foreign bank account to purchase the first missiles.

Congressional sources said they were told by U.S. intelligence officials that in February or March of last year a contra representative traveled to Western Europe, either Portugal or Belgium, and met with an arms dealer for the missile transaction. Singlaub said the contras paid about \$45,000 per missile, including about \$5,000 per launcher.

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